

HOW TO...

Manage multiple internet messaging services

Don't let incompatible internet messaging software come between you and your friends. Simon Edwards breaks the language barrier with the free Pidgin IM tool

Internet messaging (IM) services let you communicate with others online without committing to a time-consuming phone call or waiting for a reply to an email. This makes IM a convenient choice, but unfortunately there are several different, incompatible services.

The most popular IM services include Microsoft Live Messenger, Google Talk, AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) and Yahoo! Messenger. While Microsoft and Yahoo!'s services work together (although not as reliably as we'd like), they are a rare exception. Running multiple IM programs enables you to chat with everyone, but it consumes a PC's memory and slows down its performance. It would be better to use a single program that could handle all the services.

Pidgin is one such program, and it's free. Not only can you use it to communicate with people through all the main IM services, but you can even access multiple accounts on each service. For example, you can run only one instance of Microsoft Live Messenger at a time, so you can't sign in using more than one username simultaneously. Pidgin will allow you to add two or more Microsoft accounts, which could be handy if you have a business IM account and another for personal use.

1 Download the Pidgin installer file from www.pidgin.im and run it. You'll need to tick the Start menu option or the installer won't

create an icon for you to click to run the program. If you scroll down you should see a list of so-called 'URI Handlers'.

Ensure that all of these are ticked, otherwise some types of IM account won't work.

2 After installing the program, you'll be prompted to add an account. The list of protocols shown in the picture demonstrates how flexible Pidgin is. It even supports Internet Relay Chat (IRC), as well as all the mainstream IM services and some relatively obscure ones, too. If you have a Google account, choose the Google Talk option.

3 Enter your username (the part of your Google Mail email address before the '@') in the box labelled 'Screen name' and type in your password. Ignore the Domain and Resource boxes. If you want Pidgin to replace the Google Talk application, you'll also want it to alert you to new emails. Tick the 'New mail notifications' box. Click the Save button and your Google Talk contacts should appear in the Buddy List, on the far right of the screen.

4 Repeat step three for each of your IM accounts. Here we have added a Microsoft

TOP TIP

Encrypt conversations using the Pidgin-Encryption plug-in (<http://pidgin-encrypt.sourceforge.net>). Install it and enable the plug-in in Pidgin by clicking the Tools menu and choosing Plugins. Tick the Pidgin-Encryption box. To secure your conversations, click on the padlock icon at the top of the conversation window.

account. Note that Pidgin refers to Microsoft's IM system as MSN. In our case the default settings didn't work because our firewall blocked the connections. If you experience similar problems, click the Advanced tab when you add an account and tick the option to 'Use HTTP Method'. Click the Save button to create the account.

5 By default, Pidgin lists which of your contacts are online. If you choose the Buddies menu option and select Show, you should see an Offline Buddies option. Tick this to see the details of friends who are not logged in. When they log in, the icons beside their names go bright green. If they don't use their computer for a while, their icon changes to 'idle', which is a faded green colour. Contacts who don't wish to be disturbed will show a red icon.

6 Double-click a contact's name to start a conversation. A window will appear. Type your message into the bottom pane and press Enter. It will appear in the main window along with any replies. To talk to others at the same time, click on their names in the Buddy List. Each conversation appears in a tabbed window. **CS**

